Iris van Herpen

Sculpting the Senses

© Carla van de Puttelaar

15 Mar – 10 Aug

EXHIBITION GUIDE

About the Exhibition

Iris van Herpen: Sculpting the Senses showcases the work of one of the most visionary fashion designers of her generation. A pioneer in her use of new technologies, Iris van Herpen defies conventional norms of fashion, blending the traditional with innovative production techniques.

From micro to macro, this exhibition interrogates the body in space, our identities and future in a rapidly changing world. Celebrating van Herpen's future-facing and multidisciplinary approach, this unique retrospective exhibition incorporates nine themes that combine fashion with art, design, sustainability and science.

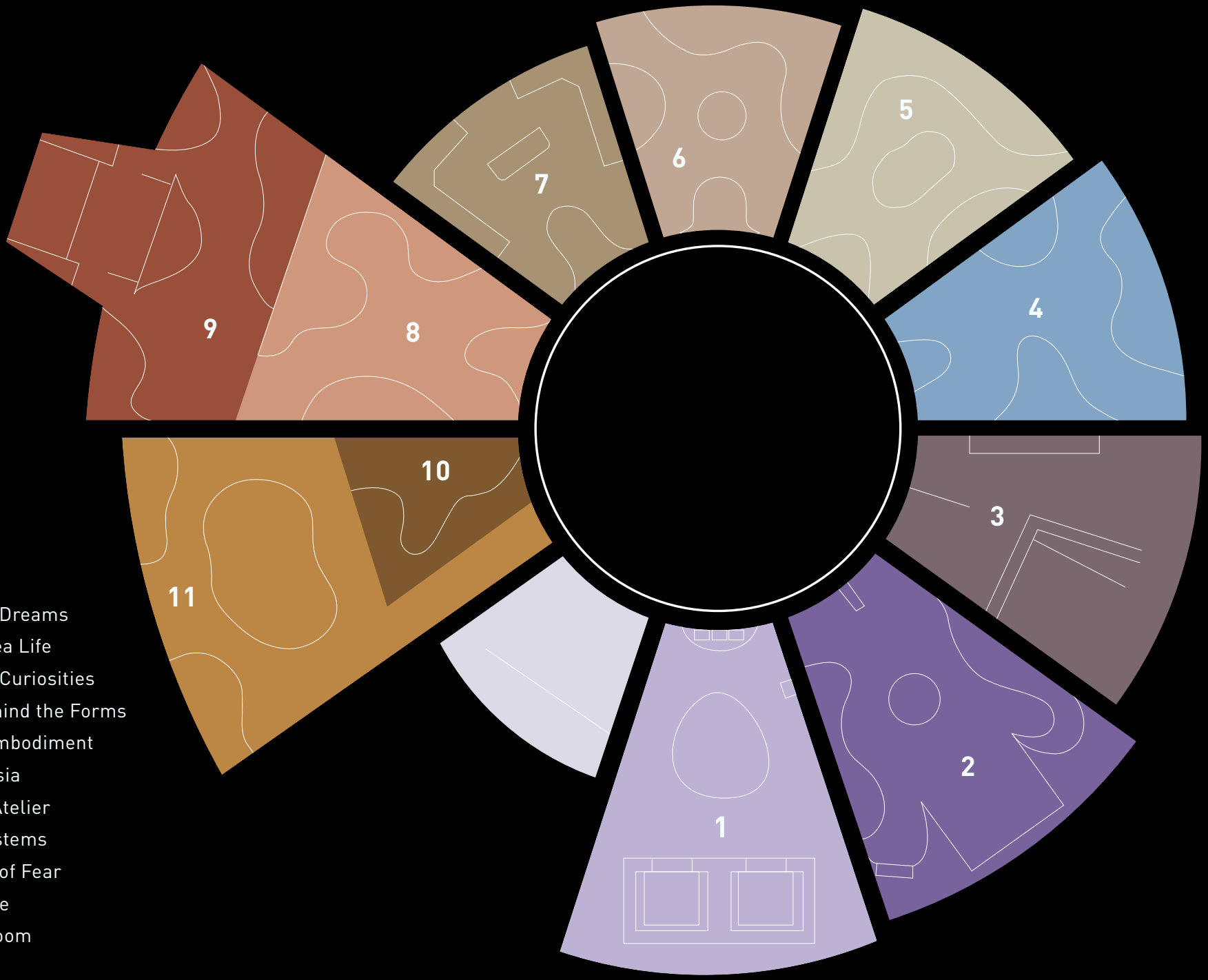
A selection of over 140 looks and accessories by Iris van Herpen are placed in dialogue with works of contemporary art and extraordinary natural history specimens. The Singapore iteration of the exhibition features local and regional content including artefacts on loan from the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum as well as other contemporary artworks curated by the ArtScience Museum team.

Artists, architects and designers featured in the exhibition are David Spriggs, Philip Beesley, 目 [Mé], Juliette Clovis, Jacques Rougerie, Tan Shao Qi, Rogan Brown, Ren Ri, Courtney Mattison, Heishiro Ishino, Tim Walker, Enrico Ferrarini, Ferruccio Laviani, Yayoi Kusama, Chun Kwang Young, Joseph Walsh, Janaina Mello Landini, Lanny Bergner, Kate MccGwire, Ruben Pang, Damien Jalet, Kohei Nawa, Casey Curran, Ivana Bašić and Kim Keever.

Iris van Herpen: Sculpting the Senses is an exhibition co-organised by Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, France and ArtScience Museum, Singapore, based on an original exhibition designed by Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

Cosmic Bloom section. Installation view, ArtScience Museum.

Gallery Map



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Iris van Herpen, *Frozen Falls* dress and headpiece, *Syntopia* collection, 2018.
Installation view, Musée des Arts Décoratifs. Photo: Luc Boegly.

Water and Dreams

In its liquid, frozen or gaseous states, water often features in Iris van Herpen's work, even forming the principal focus of her 2010 *Crystallisation* collection. A major component of the human body, the notion of water emerges from her dresses to transcend the invisible flux that constitutes our very essence. On every level—from drops of rain to a tsunami, as a poetic allegory or gateway to the shadow world, representing both harmony and chaos, in the form of foam, crystallised liquid or waves, water inspires the designer's extraordinary creativity. Bubbles suspended in space, transparent fields of mist, turquoise or deep blue waves, Iris van Herpen's aquatic pieces reveal the mystery and metaphorical power of water, manifested across a multitude of fabrics, materials and techniques from blown glass to thermoformed plexiglass, from laser cutting to *suminagashi*—a Japanese technique of marbled ink drawings.

Sensory
Sea Life

Under the surface of the oceans is a world invisible to the naked eye, that is nonetheless fundamental to life on Earth. Iris van Herpen's 2020 collection, *Sensory Seas*, draws inspiration from this ecosystem, its abundant and diverse plankton species and, on a broader scale, from sea animals, that shape the designs and textures of her dresses. Single-cell organisms and the *Hydrozoa* family such as jellyfish are the designer's most constant form of inspiration. They are her fundamental reference point as she seeks to bring them to light in her works. Just as the 19th century master glassmakers Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka revealed this elusive world with their astonishing pedagogical models, Iris van Herpen takes up the same subjects and transposes them, with craftsmanship and new technologies, into the field of haute couture.

Sensory Sea Life section. Vitrine installation view, ArtScience Museum.

Cabinet of Curiosities section.
Installation view, ArtScience Museum.

Cabinet of Curiosities

Arranged as a contemporary cabinet of curiosities, this space reflects Iris van Herpen's multiple sources of inspiration. This eclectic selection reveals her love of discovery, her interest in disciplines both adjacent to and distant from fashion, and her fascination with the richness and diversity of our world. Works of art, books, insects and other specimens evoke the spheres from which she regularly draws inspiration, to enlighten and renew her practice. Straddling centuries, the arts and sciences, her dresses are set in dialogue with footwear and accessories created in collaboration with numerous artists. An encyclopaedic representation of van Herpen's career, this cabinet is a synthesis of her endless creativity, holistic approach and talent for drawing out the connections between worlds.

Forces Behind the Forms

Iris van Herpen's fascination for shapes found in nature has led her to reflect on morphogenesis, the biological process by which organisms develop their shape and form, and the creative forces at the origins of life. That which is microscopically small is reflective of the beauty of the invisible worlds and has directed van Herpen towards a new aesthetic language and materials that transcend the field of fashion. With this perspective, she maintains a particular interest in the work of 19th century biologist Ernst Haeckel, whose illustrations shed light on many microscopic beings.

Mixing art and science, van Herpen explores both terrestrial and marine worlds to unearth new structures and textures. Her preoccupation with sustainability and the environment has led her to re-examine how we view the world, notably in her *Earthrise* collection, created with the artist Rogan Brown, in which she chose to elevate recycled plastic as material.

Siermond & Nicholas Fols for Iris van Herpen. *Magnetosphere* dress. *Earthrise* collection. 2021. Collection of Iris van Herpen.

Heishiro Ishino, *Yomotsuōkami*, 2023.
Installation view, ArtScience Museum.

Skeletal Embodiment

Cabinets of curiosities and anatomical museums are fertile grounds of inspiration for Iris van Herpen. Like the artists Michelangelo, Jean-Antoine Houdon, and many others who studied anatomical representations of the human being, van Herpen analyses the skeleton, muscles, connective tissues and systems of the body to create forms that can be worn like a second skin. Her dresses are hybrid structures, projections of our inner constitutions, that create the fiction of a new body.

Van Herpen breathes new life into the idea of the silhouette by exploring the frontier between the living and inert. Her clothing is an extension of the body and, at the same time, a mutation of complex anatomical forms. She sheds light on that which is barely perceptible through the transparency of skin, that which is only able to be revealed with technology. Her designs could be likened to an artistic Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scan, a creative X-ray of the structure of living organisms.

Synaesthesia

The materiality, autonomy and sensory systems of the body clearly resonate throughout Iris van Herpen's creations. However, other dimensions of the human experience also fascinate and inspire her. Van Herpen has taken a keen interest in the brain, particularly in the notion of synaesthesia and complex phenomena or modified states of consciousness, such as lucid dreaming and hypnosis. These interests permit her to stretch the boundaries of fashion beyond a visual or tangible experience of a piece of clothing. Fascinated by neurological research, she seeks to test perception and amplify the senses, to sculpt them along with the materials she chooses. How does one dilute the boundaries of perception? How can one stimulate the brain, with all five senses working together, to evoke a new experience?

Chun Kwang Young, *Aggregation 24 – FE010*, 2024.
Installation view, ArtScience Museum.

Alchemic Atelier

Iris van Herpen creates her collections in a former warehouse in Amsterdam, where large windows open out onto the reflective surface and serenity of the neighbouring river. Surrounded by a young and international team, van Herpen experiments with materials whenever she engages with a new collection. This approach, which she describes as a "craftolution", is based on a combination of craftsmanship and new technologies which weave haute couture with the future. She paves the way for more sustainable and responsible alternatives through her multidisciplinary approach, by revisiting manufacturing methods which led her to collaborate with a multitude of experts from architect Philip Beesley and the Living Architecture Systems Group, designers Neri Oxman and Studio Drift, to artists Rogan Brown and Kim Keever. Each of her designs is distinctive and recognisable through a fine balance of inventiveness with experimental techniques such as silicone moulding, 3D printing and waterjet-cutting to ancient plissé (a pleating technique that has been used since the pharaohs of Egypt) and even magnetised sculpting.

Alchemic Atelier section. Installation view, ArtScience Museum.

Growth Systems

Iris van Herpen is fascinated by structures, whether natural or artificial, organic or architectural. In her practice, she takes a holistic approach in blending together these areas of investigation. For van Herpen, the human body is both unique and part of a universal whole, connected to, and by, its physicality, but also its spirit, soul, memory and essence. From the singularities of the living world, van Herpen references different ecosystems, processes of growth and interconnections. For example, mushrooms, one of the first complex life forms on our planet, weave underground connections with filaments of mycelium. This mycelial network seduced van Herpen both with its beauty and the intelligence of its generative system. An ode to nature, the *Roots of Rebirth* collection is an homage to this infinitely thin subterranean organic web. In contrast to the organic is the architectural, and van Herpen celebrates the flamboyant Gothic architectural style, with her *Cathedral* dress that reinvents the codes of clothing.

Growth Systems section. Installation view, ArtScience Museum.

Samurai armour. Installation view, ArtScience Museum.

Mythology of Fear

Iris van Herpen was born in the village of Wamel in the Netherlands, situated near Den Bosch, which was the hometown of 16th century Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch. Van Herpen grew up examining Bosch's fantastical worlds that mix alchemy, mysticism and allegory. From her study of Bosch, she retains a fascination with ideas of hybridisation, an incessant questioning of human and animal nature and an interest in fusing both.

In parallel, van Herpen explores the emotion of fear Bosch's imaginary worlds invoke. This is done through her discoveries made in the collection of the Embassy of the Free Mind—an organisation in Amsterdam dedicated to freedom of thought. Van Herpen also revisited the various cabinets of curiosities she encountered in her studies of Art History. Symbolist and Surrealist literature has also led her to use metaphors as a mode of expression, elevating her work beyond conventional dressing classifications. From Ovid's *Metamorphoses* poem to Japanese mythology, van Herpen loves reinterpreting the mutations and uncanny qualities of our world and others.

New Nature

In many of her collections, Iris van Herpen's life-like silhouettes celebrate a new and futuristic concept of nature and humanity. In her perception of an imaginary future, she is, above all, interested in the distinction between nature and artifice in a society absorbed with the growing presence of Virtual Reality. Through her designs, van Herpen questions the presence of the body in a post-human world, and invites us to contemplate a society that is increasingly living "inside-out."

In her *Syntopia*, *Escapism* and *Voltage* collections, she interrogates the link between technology and science. Fascinated by the world of tomorrow, van Herpen melds disciplines, weaving them together, giving rise to a new definition of fashion in which the garment itself triggers a metamorphosis, transforming the body into a hybrid creature—the embodiment of a futuristic vision.

New Nature section. Installation view, ArtScience Museum.

Cosmic Bloom section.
Installation view, ArtScience Museum.

Cosmic Bloom

In her exploration of the cosmos, Iris van Herpen displays her talent for synthesis, combining the latest scientific discoveries with the history of art and science, blending the ancient maps of 17th century cartographer Andreas Cellarius with images from the James Webb telescope. The cosmos and its mysteries pique van Herpen's imagination and trigger her creativity.

Used as a metaphor for van Herpen's holistic and multidisciplinary approach, the cosmos represents a space in which one can explore and create without limitations, it is a symbol of absolute freedom. Colours float and come alive, offering new horizons for a body that can exist in different dimensions and planes. For the designer, to understand the cosmos is to overturn the order of time and space and achieve elevation.

The world becomes an all-encompassing entity, greater than the confines of planet Earth. It no longer develops from bottom up or top down, but in all of its dimensions simultaneously, as a multiverse, with no borders except those of the mind and the imagination, the soul and its cosmic journey.

Programmes

01

Iris van Herpen: Sculpting the Senses Opening Talk

Featuring visionary Dutch fashion designer Iris van Herpen, the opening programme of *Iris van Herpen: Sculpting the Senses* discusses her multidimensional approach to creation and the idea of transformation that informs her work.

Whether drawing from the intricate web of nature, the structural philosophy of living architecture or the fluid anatomy of the body, the vision of Van Herpen encircles the metamorphoses of the body. Join us in conversation with one of the most forward-thinking designers of our time, as we delve into how Van Herpen has created a body of work that continues to defy expectations, evolving and forging new ideas and inspirations that are based both in nature and in visions of the contemporary world.

Iris van Herpen
Photograph: Robin de Puy / © Robin de Puy

15 March 2025 (Sat),
2pm–4pm
ArtScience Cinema, Level 4
Ticketed Admission: $10

02

Guided Tours

Explore how fashion designer Iris van Herpen transforms the natural world into breathtaking couture. Drawing inspiration from the intricate patterns of underground organic webs, the movement of water, and the beauty of air currents, her designs blend organic forms with cutting-edge technology.

Guided by an Education Specialist, uncover the stories behind her innovative techniques—from 3D printing to handcrafting—and how she reimagines the relationship between fashion and the environment.

From 8 April 2025
English Tours: Selected Tuesdays, 4pm
Mandarin Tours: Selected Saturdays and Sundays, 3pm
Level 3 Galleries
Ticketed

Buy tickets

03

Mind and Body: The Art and Science of Being Human

What does it mean to think, feel and exist as human beings in an age where technology augments our lives, minds and bodies?

Through a season of artworks, films and programmes, we invite you to navigate the intricate relationship between our physical bodies and cognitive minds as shaped by biotechnology, experience and emotion. Celebrate the human experience and challenge notions of identity, agency and what it truly means to be alive.

Jan–Jul 2025
Mix of Ticketed and Complimentary Programmes

Buy tickets

Acknowledgement

Iris van Herpen: Sculpting the Senses is an exhibition co-organised by Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, France and ArtScience Museum, Singapore based on an original exhibition designed by Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

Iris van Herpen: Sculpting the Senses was originally curated by Louise Curtis and Cloé Pitiot from the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. The Singapore iteration of the exhibition was curated and produced with ArtScience Museum.

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Iris van Herpen Partner: Netherlands

Fashion Programming Partner: VOGUE

Design and Build Partner: SPACElogic

ArtScience Museum would like to thank all the staff who have worked on the development, production and delivery of this exhibition. We are particularly grateful to:

Musée des Arts Décoratifs Team

Marie Brimicombe
Jacques Bungert
Josépha Caumont-Carpentier
Sylvie Corréard
Louise Curtis
Nathalie Coulon
Yvon Figueras
Bénédicte Gady
Charlotte Hamel
Olivier Hassler
Mathurin Jonchères
Giulia Nardelli
Stéphane Perl
Cloé Pitiot
Nicolas Polowski
Myriam Tessier

Based on a scenographic idea by Agence NC, Maëlys Chevillot, Nathalie Crinière. Based on a graphic idea by Agnès Dahan Studio. Multimedia Design by Acil&Pierre / VDM

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Rafi Dean
Charmaine Kok
Emma Lee
Md Ashraff
Deborah Neo
Ken Ong
Hariz Rosli
Md Salihuddin
Ashley Tay
Diona Teo
Rachel Wong
Bao Xin Zhang

Business and Innovation

Remus Kan
Tan Li Ling
Jason Teo
Jessie Woo

Brand, Marketing and Communications

Adeline Ang
Sarah Hana
Alexandra Hornberg
Lam Mei Wen
Crystal Lee
Rachel Lee
Alex Lew
Tammi Lin
Anika Nale
Ng Jing Zhi
Sarina Pushkarna
Tan Jou Teng
Julia Tan
Bryan Tjoa

We share our thanks to all our frontline staff, and the staff who have developed educational activities, programmes and supporting materials that accompany the exhibition.

Rating: Advisory (Some Nudity)

ArtScience Museum wishes to thank the following lenders, partners and contributors for their support towards *Iris van Herpen: Sculpting the Senses*:

Kerry Dyson Allen
Lauren Amos
Bainbridge Island Museum of Art
Ivana Bašić
Philip Beesley
Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica
Black Crow Taxidermy & Art
Rogan Brown
Irene Bussemaker
Centraal Museum
Bryan Chin
Chun Kwang Young
Juliette Clovis
Casey Curran
Enrico Ferrarini
Shruti L. Hora
Instituto Cajal
Heishiro Ishino
Damien Jalet
Kim Keever
Nick Knight
Haruka Kojin
Yayoi Kusama
Janaina Mello Landini
Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, National University of Singapore
Maison Parisienne Gallery
Courtney Mattison
Kate MccGwire
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James Merry
Dr Pierre Miron
Kohei Nawa
Ota Fine Arts
Parkwood Entertainment, LLC
Ruben Pang
PODIUM
Ren Ri
Richard Koh Fine Art
Ronald Ooi
Jacques Rougerie
SCAI THE BATHHOUSE
Singapore Fossil Collectors
David Spriggs
Sundaram Tagore Gallery
Tan Shao Qi
Tim Walker
Lizzie Tisch
Joseph Walsh Studio

Iris van Herpen Atelier

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Anne-Sofie Bierman
Kecia Benvenuto
Salvador Breed
Laurine Chevalier
Simona Gol
Axel Hagedorn
Marit de Hoog
Dominika Kasova
Petra Kramer
Eve Moissiard
Eva Mulder
Christian Reiche
Stefanie Reppert
Peter Rijntjes
Petra Schuddeboom
Claudia Tiessink

Iris van Herpen would like to extend her gratitude to:

Lauren Amos
Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode
Olivier Gabet
Som Wipaporn Jirapatpisarn
Jordan Roth
Lizzie Tisch

Philip Beesley Studio would like to extend their gratitude to:

Canada Council for the Arts
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
University of Waterloo

Most museums practise the 'NO FLASH' photography rule. The ultraviolet light of the flash generates heat and light, both of which can damage artworks.

You may have noticed art handlers wearing plastic gloves. This is because the oil on our hands causes a chemical reaction with almost everything we touch.

For artworks, this can have a detrimental effect, so please do not touch.

You may notice that our museum is quite cold. Artworks must be kept at a specific low temperatures and relative humidity to protect them from deterioration.

Taking photographs in the museum is encouraged unless otherwise signposted.

Want to know more about collection conservation guidelines? Visit the International Council of Museums for more information. https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/

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